“THE DIAMOND”

A short story

by

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THE DIAMOND

Jack DeCarlo – his real name was John, but everybody called him Jack – was a good kid but some people always wondered why he didn't get out and around a bit more. He seemed to just stay by himself all the time. Nice kid, smart kid, but quiet, very quiet. He was so quiet that it was hard to know what he was thinking. But he was thinking something.

At the time that I'm talking about he was 18, 19 years old. His mother wanted him to hurry up and get married. His father wanted him to wait so he could save his money. He was working hauling crates around at Marra's produce wholesale place. Cool in the summer, at least keep you out of the wind in the wintertime. Not too bad. This was how he thought about it. He didn't make that much money, but he didn't need to anyway, and he was still living at home. He was a nice guy, but he had no particular ambition.

There was this girl. Her name was Jeanette. Jeanette. The other girls sniffed when they mentioned her. That tells you something. And the women got these very serious faces, and Sr. Margaret looked like she had something up herself, and Sr. Rose looked like she had a lemon drop that she was sucking on and the priest Fr. Conti pretended not to notice certain things about her but he always looked like he had one of his hands on a power line or something. She was the sort of girl one does notice. She was like a little Sicilian earthquake happening everywhere all the time. Jeanette.

What trouble women have because of men! Women are like invoices stuck down onto a long nail, hammers pound chicken breasts as flat as pie crusts, the bite marks of a thousand kisses stain their breasts like crushed berries and a whole household goes on top of them like a roller over a freshly tarred driveway. And if on top of that she isn't Mary and Margaret

and everybody else, some people will think that she's who knows what. Both Jeanette and her father Al were thinking about all of this and especially about this last point.

And Jack was a nice-looking guy, that was the other thing. Strong, nice, and also handsome. Well somebody will pay for eggs only when they're fresh. So Jeanette's father Al – her mother had run away with some Irish car salesman and was never heard from again, some people said she lived in Florida and they also said that this was the reason why Jeanette was the way she was, people even said that she had taken the diamond ring Al had given her – a fair sized rock – and thrown it in his face – so Jeanette and her father Al started to consider all of these various circumstances. By this point she was 19, 20.

Sometimes Al liked to gamble. He went to a poker game every Friday in the back room at Canale's. Tubolino owed him 700 from one of them, and he still hadn't paid, but Al was a nice guy too. But not everybody was. While he was waiting on that money from Tubby, he'd gotten into another game up on the north side with some people that he didn't know and he lost that much and then trying to get it back had lost that much more. At that point he called it quits. Caponegro walked him to the door, the last three fingers of his hand like feathers on the back of Al's shoulder.

It was on one of those side streets up there, the sidewalks cracking like peanut brittle, no lights anywhere. You go out to your car and the street is so dark you think you're in a well. They both stood at the back door. Baccala soaked in a kettle like a drowned body that had just floated up. Caponegro pushed the wooden screen door open with his fingertips as though with a mole's hand. His cigar smoke was the trumpet of doom set into the corner of his mouth. He had two mail box slits instead of eyes. He looked at Al the way a tailor looks at a pair of pants to be shortened.

Therefore, Al needed to make money.

It was the worst thing he ever did. If anyone would ever find out, they would all come in the middle of the night to kill him. They would hang him

onto the nearest tree with a sign. He had to go to the priest seven times. The priest himself couldn't believe it. But Al thought that he was only using what was already there, which is always the smartest thing to do, as we know. The water was already running off the roof; he was merely putting a barrel underneath.

He started with drunks that he got from the hotels downtown when the soldiers from the army base would come in for rest and relaxation. He had informal meetings with interested parties from the base itself, including a few officers. He was always discreet. Things were going forward. Of course, his debt was soon paid off, but he had sailed past all that a while before. He could see the potential in all of this. It was unorthodox, admittedly, but there were many things to be taken into consideration in making these assessments. But then one day the MP's came around. So Al had an expense that he hadn't bargained on. People will take advantage.

He made a deal with them. Jeanette had professional contacts by now. It was a sort of club. One night she was walking back home. Her father had forgotten her somehow. This happened every so often, and so she had to walk back from outer arsenal street all the way over to Emmett Street. She'd had a few drinks. She tottered on her high heels swiveling around on them like piled up plates on a waiter's tray. She had crushed ice in her throat and cigarette smoke in her stomach. A band played in her head. The moon came out from a cloud. It looked like a swimmer's face floating in the waves, but about to go under. The empty street had a lunar feel to it. It was not the moon, but it was the earthly equivalent of the moon. She remembered her mother in a way that was both clear and insubstantial. Her mother's voice, her mother's face, were lost in her memory the way the sound of a wooden door banging shut five blocks away is lost in the wide silence of a summer afternoon. She pulled herself together. She was determined. The toes of her high heels hit the sidewalk as though she were stubbing out cigarettes with each step. Who can say what will come out of

what, on the face of the earth? It is a thing unknown, and we do not know what something is just by looking at it.

All the time she was saving up her money. Her father thought that he was handling everything she made. And sometimes when he counted money he reminded her of a hen pecking grain. But she was the one who spelled everything out to the customers themselves, and on top of that she'd made each one of them think that he was her one special favorite, playing each one off against the others. She made more than anyone imagined. In this way she sheltered a fair percentage of her income. Her plan was to buy a car, drive to California and break into the movie business, one way or another. She had a fair level of self-confidence. At the same time, like a climbing vine, she twined around and around and quite above Al's four square arrangements.

Father and daughter fought all the time. He knew what she wanted to do. She wanted to go; he wanted her to stay. At some point, who knows when, he thought of Jack. But what did Jack know? Jack knew what everybody knew. But what did everybody know?

Al sat in an armchair one evening. The window was open. Rain came down outside, the first rain of the early summer. There was a smell like something fermenting and also like sea spray. It was the time when the world renewed itself. It was not just plants and animals that did, the world itself did, somehow. With each new spring the world of human beings grew somewhat larger. They had been filling the world up with their curious inventiveness, like pouring golden ginger ale into a tall glass of ice cubes. Now there were new structures and a new light. At some point there would be only human beings, and the world would be a different place with different people in it.

Who knows if it would be a better one, but who could say exactly what was what? Things were complex. It was impossible to judge exactly. He had gotten accustomed to the whole thing. He always thought of himself as a versatile type of person. Rigidity was always a disadvantage. Speculating

along these lines, he let his mind flit idly about, like a moth held in a paper bag. The moth's wings batting against the paper's skin were like raindrops tapping the canvas of a green tent. The moth's hectic body was like the flame inside a paper lantern. Maybe they would have a child. He was wondering if he could arrange this. This could work really well. The possibilities would be endless. But how to get it through to her. She was so difficult sometimes.

Sister Mary Jesse. She was one of the younger nuns. She was not even Italian, she was something else. She had an ear-to-ear type of smile – genteel, frozen, careful. Her smile had had its throat cut, miraculously survived, and was now healing slowly. She bore the pain with a good grace somewhere in her abdomen.

Appointment to see her. The convent always smelled like a cedar chest. It was silent like a museum. The wooden floor was very polished. Al sat straight-backed on a straight-backed chair. Sister sat opposite, her face listening. Al explained certain things. He was concerned about Jeanette. She lacked direction. She was drifting. She had no motivation. He thought the best thing would be for her to get together with a boy her own age. Sister asked why "a boy her own age," what other type of boy would there be? Al had to back up quickly, brush out his tracks as best he could and get back on the road. Sister's face, from this point on, was listening only by two thirds; one third was doing something else. She agreed to talk to Jeanette.

Oh, the difficulties of making a living! Jack had a lot of energy, but he didn't really like the fruit warehouse place. It was all right, but it was maybe not the best way to spend the rest of your life. But what would that be? What is the rest of your life?
How can you even imagine it?

The other guys at work were mostly older. (Jack had gotten the job only because his uncle Dominic knew Marra, the owner.) These guys had been doing this who knows for how long. Pat was over thirty and he was still pushing around a dolly loaded up with sacks of potatoes, loaded up with

crates of cantaloupe, loaded up with boxes of oranges and bananas. Tom was even older. He sat in the back room on a brown metal folding chair, a thermos of coffee open on the table, a stained white cloth over it, a cigarette burning in a blue glass ash tray. The coffee in the red thermos cap was the color of milk chocolate. A chocolate cupcake, half eaten, sat on the table cloth displaying its snowy insides. A magazine, whose pages were as glossy as castor oil, was spread open on his lap. Girls with no clothes on smiled at no one, each from her own photographic square; breasts were displayed in handfuls and bunches. The girls did not stare with their eyes, but other parts of them stared. Their teeth smiled with arctic purity. You know, Tommy would say, I don't know. Sometimes. I don't know. And then he would let out a soft sigh. But hey Jack, he would say, Jack Jack.… Yeah? Jack would answer. I heard you got a real looker there. Tommy would always start up out of these depressed reveries with a friendliness that was like spilling something out. It was like oranges and lemons spreading all over the floor. It was not bad, but it was a little out of control sometimes. Yah I heard you got a real hot number there, he would grin. He had a wide mouth with thin lips, a hooknose like a German, corrugated black hair, and a little moustache across his upper lip. He wore a white apron. Where'd you hear that? Jack said. I heard it, I heard it. I heard it was that girl what's her name, Sheri? No, Jack said. He was looking down at the concrete floor, sweeping.

It was summer now. They were putting out pints of cherries and strawberries, the peaches would be coming soon. He thought of the green tinted marble of the honeydew and the smell of the wooden crates of cantaloupes or of the shell-thin wooden slats stained by strawberries or blueberries. Stepping out the front entrance – it was open like a garage – he looked up at the sky. The blue sky with faint white streaks here and there seemed to be shouting up into the heights. It looked like a hand had skimmed across the surface of the sky and scooped up piles of glowing white clouds leaving only some streaks behind.

Meanwhile Jeanette went to see sister Mary Jesse. It was an interesting discussion on both sides. It was quite productive. History does not record exactly what was said, but when Jeanette got back she seemed to be in a different mood from when she went out. Al was pleased. He was surprised. He was delighted.

One day Jeanette turned up at the fruit place. She was looking for some fruit. Tommy was out in front, unloading wooden frames of watermelons, each one as green as a piece of jade, each one inside the color of a peony. Tommy looked at her; he looked at her some more. He went inside to see if she might need some help. Out in front, the sun coming down was the color of lemonade, but inside it was iced tea. Tommy squinted through leopard spots and Jeanette's white dress moved ahead of him, her legs glimmered near a pyramid of nectarines where one slender drapey arm was reaching up to the top. He watched the heel of one foot come part way out of a low-cut shoe and he glimpsed the bare underside.

Jack came out and asked him what was going on. They needed the truck unloaded. Jeanette stopped what she was doing and smiled. Now it is always rather interesting to consider that no matter how small a town might be there will always be people living in it who never meet each other. And then there are those moments when they finally do. This was one of them. Tommy knew instantly what was going on and looked down at the floor, the inside of him was smiling from one ear to the other. Jack didn't know what he knew, but he knew that he knew something, although he didn't know exactly what. Jeanette tingled a little bit in certain spots, screwed her big toe around on the floor, and went toward the cash register. Jack went over to take care of her.

Now at about that time Jack had been keeping company with a girl by the name of Sheri. She was quite different from Jeanette. Blond and fair, she looked almost like a Protestant. Jack liked her, but being with her was a little bit like drinking a glass of milk. A funny thing about her was the fact that although she was basically a nice person, she knew almost everybody

else's business. She knew things about Jeanette, for example, or at least she thought she did. More importantly, she knew where to find out more. The women, after all, were always talking.

Some of this talk got back around. It even got back around to Al and it even got back around to Jeanette. But she had been acting strangely for a while. Ever since the day of the fruit, in fact. And in fact, she had gone on strike. This put Al in an awkward position. On the one hand this and this, and on the other hand that and that. He let her alone. He made phone calls. He made excuses. She stayed in her room most of the time. When she came out it was in order to take a bath. She stayed in the bathroom for months on end. Then from out of this white box of wood and porcelain she would finally emerge in a sticky cloud of five different kinds of steam, turbaned and flushed.

Then one day she came home and ran to her room. She threw herself onto the bed and cried. The bed jiggled. Al came in to ask her what was wrong, but she wouldn't tell him. Still, he could guess. What did he say to you, he asked. Nothing nothing. What do you mean nothing? Then why are you crying? he said. I'm not crying, she answered as she smeared tears away with the back of her wrist. I'm not crying.

Al began to think. He was sensitive about things like this. He decided he would talk to Jack's parents. But he made the mistake of saying this out loud, partly to himself, partly to no one. But of course, Jeanette was there. She threw herself onto him. She was like weed clinging onto a boat that's being hauled up. He was not accustomed to this. What's wrong with you? he said. Don't go there, she said

It was clear that this was something serious. He hesitated. It was as if his daughter now were an ancient and priceless drawing, were a painting, a portrait, a unique and jewel-like building, a basilica, intricate and sovereign, a painting of scenes that are themselves the very essence of happiness, a landscape streaming with light that was of an infinite depth and abundance. He was responsible for this, now and forever. He must take it carefully from

the frame in which it was fixed, without harming it. He must lift the picture of infinite light from the wall where it had been placed, without damaging it, as though one would take a postage stamp and peal it away from the envelope. The phone rang. He recognized the voice but couldn't place it. He asked certain questions. He put the thing down and called her. Jeanette came to the phone, listened for a moment and then calmly slammed it down. Al said nothing.

After a while she came out of her room and walked into the living room where he was sitting. She said that she was going out. When he asked where, he was surprised at the answer. She was going to see the nun. What for? he asked. I'm thinking of joining, she said. That was all she said.

Driving to the convent, she was sure what she was going to do. She was going to leave right now. She had been restless in the place for a while. But yet she was uncertain about the money. She had saved, but she had also spent. She did like clothes, and of course she always needed to look nice. Most likely one does not normally go to a nun to ask advice about such things, but what else can one do, if that's the way it is. You have to be practical.

Sister Mary Jesse was surprisingly helpful. She knew much more about money than anyone would have expected. She inquired about the exact sum; it was necessary to know details in order to really judge these things. When she was told, her face changed just slightly. And then she made an unusual proposal. She said that Jeanette should transfer this money into the account kept by the convent. They had a communal one, the sisters. She (Sister) knew all about it, and she knew from experience what could happen to money and what, most likely, would not happen to it, what could be done with it, and what, in general, should not be done. She would see to it that it was someplace where no one, not even her father, could get to it, and where it would be safe and where it would also increase over time. Then when Jeanette was ready, she could get it back to use for whatever she would like. As far as Jack was concerned, she would ask his parents to

send him for a talk. History does not record what Jeanette said, but she did agree to bring the money the next time she came. Sister said this would be fine.

The next thing that had happened was this. Jeanete was bold, she was very bold. She ambushed Jack one day when he was getting out of work. She smiled at him from the frame of the driver's window. So he went with her.

It was one of those times. How many of them does one person have in a lifetime? There is always a definite number, it is sobering to remember that. They drove out through the back roads, along the river where it made its way through paddock and deep maple glens. There were few houses, lying remote and dark among the blue green trees, like ships washed up onto a strange shore. The dim paths of their driveways tied them with ribbons of beige dust. Fireflies pricked out the deeper dark with their invisible needles. Some streets with an enchanted feel to them lead absolutely nowhere. They walked, holding hands, up one dark lane. The trees towering up were fountains and stars were bright points showering down. Moonlight made webs and doilies out of leaf shadows on the manila paper sand of the path. Near an iron fence, fingers of beech trees were drawn together by a palm of thick grass. It was more than silent, it was still. At a certain point, in a certain spot, they kissed. How many such moments in a life can there be?

He got back rather late. When he did, his parents were waiting for him. Actually, his mother was waiting and his father was asleep in a chair that was shaped like a roller coaster. Yet he was going nowhere, except to the land of dream itself, voyaging there among the sofa, the cabinets, the tv, the upholstered footstools, the coffee table and doilies. A newspaper had fallen to the floor beside him and lay there like a book thrown down spine upward. But his mother was on guard duty in her pink robe and beehive of tissue paper around her hair. Where have you been, she hissed. Out, he said. I been out. You been out, just like that? She said. Yeah. Hey, his father

started up like a sleeper in a parked car awakened by cops. Hey, you don't talk to your mother like that. Sorry, Jack said, ducking his head as though her were pressing something down with his throat. He was still feeling pretty good. Ok ok, he said and went to his room. He had a hard time getting to sleep that night, but eventually he did. Unfortunately, the next morning was a rude awakening.

Sheri had called. She felt that Jack's parents should know about certain things that were being said. She knew that it wasn't her business strictly speaking and especially since they were not seeing each other anymore and she also wanted to say that she didn't hold it against him for breaking up with her in the way he did, and no she didn't really want to get into all of that, it was too painful for her still, but she did think that his parents should be aware that various things had been being said about that what's her name? Jeanette. Yes, Jeanette and that although she, Sheri, did not generally pay attention to gossip she thought that in this case she would make an exception since she didn't want to see Jack get into some kind of trouble or have rumors start up and perhaps even about his family too. His family too? Yes, of course. What she meant was that it wasn't just the girl Jeanette? Yes. Yes, her, but her father too. Her father? What about her father? Certain things had been being said for a while and she, Sheri, didn't know all the details so she didn't want to say too much but she hoped that Jack would be happier with his new fiancé. Fiancé?

It would have been difficult to say which of these little shocks registered highest on the Richter scale – the part about Jeanette, the part about someone being a fiancé, or the part about Al himself. Everybody knew Al was – well he was what he was, what can you say, and that was fine, but there are limits, obviously. At any rate, although neither of them could say exactly what was what, they did know that they didn't want Jack mixed up with this, this Jeanette. No, they didn't.

None of this was lost on Jeanette. Rumors are like cracks in dry earth, they branch everywhere like spider webs. No one is immune. You can

shut your eyes but then it comes in anyway through your ears. You can plug your ears, but then it comes in anyway through your eyes. It's like a million leaks cracking open everywhere. No one is immune. Jeanette heard everything. They might just as well have been standing in her room insulting her to her face. She flushed when she thought about it. And furthermore, she blamed herself. She did. She was a – she didn't want to use the word. In her mind she never used it. It was always there, following her around, it followed her like a dog, but she went through the day not looking at it. At night, she got a little drunk. So then she was determined to leave. It was sooner than she had been expecting, and she always had expected to, that had always been part of her plan, and it had been unwise to get mixed up with Jack, he was just a temporary thing, this was obvious. But she couldn't tell her father. He would make a scene and who knows what kinds of trouble he would make. So she was going to run away in secret. She was going to just disappear.

She was in her room one night, sitting there, thinking. She was making a list of all the things she would need to take with her, but the first thing and the last thing she thought of was money. She made a mental note to go and see Sr. Mary Jesse, so that she could get her money back. Then, after a while, she went to bed. She lay there for an hour, for two hours; at a certain point she dozed off, but after a little while she woke up and lay there, wide awake. An ancient railroad passed through the old town, and she heard it in the distance as the sound disappeared into a kind of dim and hollow corridor. She could hear the silence that stared out through the whole house. What time was it now? The thought of leaving everything she was familiar with made her feel strange inside, and this might explain her unusual actions. She got up and dressed and went downstairs. Then standing there in the kitchen, she looked around, listened around. It was the house, the old house, the old life that she heard. But now many things had changed, and they had changed so quickly.

She stepped out the back door and walked around the garage, breathing in the fresh air. As though on a sudden impulse, though she must have been thinking of it all along, she got into her car. Pulling from the driveway she saw someone there. Of course it was Jack. What are you doing here? she asked. I was taking a walk, he said. At this hour? I couldn't sleep, he said. What about you? he asked. Taking a drive, she said. At this hour? he said, and they both laughed.

This time they drove away from everything. Like daring swimmers, they went out even further. Out of town and onto some back roads, and then the back roads of the back roads. He told her there was a particular farmhouse that he wanted to see in the moonlight. He said it was like a many-faceted diamond on the velvet green tongue of the hillside. He said he knew the place because he used to know someone who lived there. Oh really? who was that? she said. No one important, he said. She didn't say anything but just drove on. The night's black dress was unzipped by their headlights and closed up behind them

At last they approached the cemetery. They walked out into the starlight. The opening to the cemetery was a gate of stone. But the heavy dolmens looked like peanut butter cookies clustered with almonds. They passed through it on their way to visit the land of the silent. At a certain point he stepped behind her and kissed her on her neck. She whispered back. We have to be careful, she said. Of what? Sometimes my father follows me. I don't believe you, he said. You just don't want to believe me, she said. He wouldn't follow us here, he said to her. He might, she said to him under her breath. No, he wouldn't, he said, and I still don't believe you. Look at those clouds. The wind….do you feel it? Yes, she said. Rain is coming. He grabbed her from behind and she squirmed against him in a shivering struggle and he ran his fingers over her nipples and she pressed his hand there and his other hand was over her belly. She turned her face back toward him and they kissed again.

The night was dark and fragrant; all around the breeze blew, the trees tops staggered, floating, pointing upward. They walked along holding hands. The grass was springy under foot. She was walking ahead of him, making a show of pulling him as though they were forging ahead against a current. Her dark brown hair was indigo, her face was charred with deep shadows, as she stretched her hands out to him. Then a quick breeze full of leaf shadows like eyes chilled her all over. She shimmied into it with movement of her hips and shoulders. There was something inside of her. She knew that there was, and only now did she really feel what it was to be alive. They stood there waiting for each other. White branches swam toward the moon like water snakes. They held hands spinning, it was a children's game, and their faces floated up around each other out of the river of time.

But a whole upheaval was waiting for them when they got back. Rumors flew this way and rumors flew that way. Her father was beside himself. He was outraged. She had stayed out practically the entire night! Jack's parents were equally upset. Things had gone far enough. Enough. His mother fluttered and turned pink, his father stormed around the living room like a tornado. His sister was laughing to herself like rain dripping. The roof of the family, not of the house, began to leak at several little points. Jack did not like being told what to do, but in this case he was told what to do. An entire anthill of voices was swarming in his ear, without really saying very much. But he understood anyway. No more Jeanette, they said. Go back to your glass of milk, they said.

Now Jack and Jeanette knew that everyone was against them. The small lighted candle that they were was either blown upon by fierce storm winds or else it was covered by a suffocating lid. In the whole town there seemed to be no room for them. Jack's father had even told him to go and join the army. And the more Jack thought about everything, the more depressed he got. The more Jeanette thought about everything, and especially her own father, the more depressed she got. Jack must not join

the army, she said to herself, no matter what. And she must get her money back from sister Mary Jesse so that then the two of them could go away.

One night the crickets were burning outside like hot coals. A green shade hung in the window like a leaf hanging down. It never moved. The air was cooking something. Her father knocked softly and then came to her room, sort of apologetically. He sat on the wooden chair near the dresser. She sat on the bed. He asked her what she was planning to do, but she told him that she wasn't planning to do anything. They looked at each other. She told him that Jack was going to join the army, and she noticed that at that moment his mood seemed to brighten up a little.

Jack lay on his bed at home. No one disturbed him. No one had spoken to him in a while. He couldn't actually remember the last time, although he didn't think about it that much. He only thought about two things, both having to do with Jeanette. Well maybe three or four things. He asked her when she could get the money, and she told him that she would go to the convent this week. She told him about the idea of going away, of going to California. He was skeptical about the movie business, but he liked the idea of the place itself. Sun, sky, sea, light, open space, new people.

They went to see Sr. Mary Jesse. The convent smelled like a cedar chest. And it was still silent like a museum. But there seemed to be something different, though it was impossible to say what. They sat straight-backed in straight-backed chairs. An older nun, Sr. Rose, came in to say that Sr. Mary Jesse couldn't see them.

This was strange. Jeanette said sister had told them to come at that time. Yes, Sr. Rose said, but Sr. Mary Jesse was not feeling well. In fact, she had been taken ill rather suddenly. The doctor was expected. Perhaps they would like to call at another time. They left but the convent trailed with them like perfume or like the smell of mothballs.

It was evening. The sky was golden sand bars washed by opal waves. The waves led out into a vast ocean from which even then, by just looking up, they could see small lights beckoning. They wanted to take a drive, but

Jack had to work the next day. But they went for a drive anyway. They were eating ice cream at this old drive-in place called Puff's. It doesn't exist anymore, but it did then. They sat in her car in the parking lot. She wore a yellow dress that clung to her shape. A white bra strap slipped down onto her shoulder now and then and she hooked it back with a little dip and scooping movement. Joe was watching her. She was watching him. The world was noisy around them – traffic on Washington Street, children playing over near the Coca-Cola bottling plant, a box-like stone building that looked like a fire house, unruly children with plastic hoops and voices like noisy rain. She told him, almost without thinking, that her father was under the impression that Jack was going into the army. Why does he think that? he asked. Something made me say it, I don't know what, she said. Why, do you think that you're too good for that or something? No, I don't think that, he said. You think the idea of going to the west coast is stupid, don't you? she said. No, it just depends on what you're going there for, he said. So what are we going there for? she asked. Looking for something new, he said. He was watching the street. Do you want to have a baby? she said. Are you going to have one? I might, she said. I see, he said. He was silent and then he said, So everybody else knows but me. It was not a question, it was a statement. You knew all along, right? she said. I know different things, he said. Sometimes I don't exactly know what I know. My father made me do it, Jeanette said, she did not mean the child. No, that's a lie, he told her. He sort of did, she said. I guess, Joe said.

They drove up to Thompson park, neither of them speaking. They sat on the sloping hill top, looking out over the town. It was dark now, and it was still quite hot and humid. The summer night was a sponge soaking them, wiping them over. Whole bouquets of perfume unpetaled in each breeze. Every breath was like a whole field breathed in.

They went back to see Sister two days later, in the evening. Amazingly she still was not feeling well. Sr. Rose said that Sister might not be able to see anyone for a while. Maybe they should write her instead. She asked if

she, Sr. Rose, could help them, but they didn't want to tell her about why they were there. After all, they were eloping.

Two days later they heard the news, and everyone was shocked. Such things sometimes happen and when they do, no one can believe it at first. It seems to be a universal law of human nature, to not want to believe that such bad and such unexpected things will strike down near you like lightning. For this reason perhaps some people lose all hope in the world. It seems to them something absolutely unredeemable and anything good in it is really something negative or if not negative then insignificant in the context of the larger darkness. But if the night is the world and if the candle wick that is burning is somehow shaped by that night, that very world, then the night itself is burning, and the light that the candle casts is like ghostly hands at work somewhere beneath the surface, toiling, shaping, adjusting.

Yes, it was strange, but it seemed to be the case. Jack's parents were actually the first ones to find out, and when they did, like everybody else, they couldn't believe it. Sr. Mary Jesse was gone. No one knew where she was. She had been missing for some days now. But everything was being kept very quiet. They didn't want anyone to know just yet, because they didn't know themselves what had happened. Was she dead? No one knew. Was she alive? No one knew. Where did she go? No one knew. Well shouldn't they call the police? someone asked. No, that wouldn't be good, was the reply. Why not, someone said. Well because, was the answer. But why? was the question. Because it wouldn't be a good thing right now.

It was a delicate situation. It turned out that Al had had some money that was obscurely connected with the affairs of the convent, by way of Sr. Mary Jesse. It turned out that actually Tubolino knew her too. In fact, he was the one who had put Al onto the whole thing, just as he had put him onto the poker game at Caponegro's, and if that hadn't taken place, well certain things wouldn't have, perhaps. But he didn't want to think about that right now, he wasn't in the mood. He was out $10,000. And at that time, that was a fair sum. People will take advantage.

Al was angry, he was enraged, he was more than enraged, he was incensed. He stormed around the living room like a tornado. He drank things, he ate things, he threw things, he smashed things, and at a certain point he went upstairs and went to bed. His annoyance was certainly understandable. He had lost $10,000. Tubolino was a bare faced who knows what. For the first time in years Al reached into the nightstand by his bed and put his hand on the little item he kept there. But then, like a sudden storm, his anger subsided. He closed the drawer. And then at a certain point, as though in the after echo of a great noise, he was filled with horror at himself. Was he out of his mind? he wondered. He liked to think of himself as a sensible person, sensible as well as versatile. And to think what he had just thought of doing…! But where was Tubolino? He hadn't heard from him in who knows how long. So he went looking.

Jeanette had never seen her father like this. She asked Jack to come with her to see what he was going to do. They followed at a distance.

Al slid over to the Palace Luncheonette. Pete the Greek was behind the counter. Eh. Eh. Greeks were all right, they were almost like Italians. Bonfiglio was in a booth in the corner eating a club sandwich with a platter of fries. He ducked his head while chewing and his glasses slid down his nose. He motioned for Al to sit down and with the same hand he tried to catch his glasses. It looked like when a dog wipes its eye with its paw. Eh. Eh. Have you seen Tubby? Nobody's seen Tubby, Bonfiglio, chewed. Actually, Bonfiglio did not so much chew, he masticated. Where is he? I don't know. If I knew, I'd go there. He owe you money? Bonnfiglio asked. Yes. Yeah, same here. What about Caponegro's? No. No? No, Bonfiglio said shaking his chin. His chin had its own chin somewhat bigger, and they both shook. As much as I hate to say, Bonfiglio expanded, he put his sandwich down and sat back his elbows hanging low, letting the engine idle for a bit, he's too smart, he said, for this. Also, Tubby would know better. You know. Right, Al said. Right. Yeah, Bonfiglio said. He lit a cigarette. He was wearing a light blue summer suit, white shirt and powder blue tie. He

adjusted the inner tubes inside his shirt with one thumb and palm heel, like hitching something up. And that broad he had, he exhaled two cones of smoke from his nostrils. His nose was broad and flat. That broad he had, Bonfiglio said. What broad? Al asked. I don't know, Bonfiglio shrugged, a broad, I don't know. His wife? Al asked. Was he married? Yeah, you know he married that Spano girl. Spano, Bonnfiglio said, as though remembering the fondest days of youth. Donny? Yeah. His sister? Yeah. The younger or the older? Younger. Hah. Yeah, I remember that now and his wedding come to think…at the club on Arsenal Street, yeah that was the time me and Joey got so shit faced, boy. Yeah but look, Bonnie, this broad, what did she look like? Like she had an ulcer or something? Yeah, yeah, Bonnie said, thoughtfully. Nice smile though, he said. Real classy type of broad you know, looked like a protestant. Right, Al said. He didn't know how much to say, but then it turned out that many people knew many things anyway, including Bonnfiglio.

Jeanette and Jack were sitting outside in her car. Al came out. He came over holding his arms like a goal post. Tubolino and Sr Mary are gone, they're gone. He swirled around and waved his arms like he was trying to fly. What do you mean gone, Dad? I mean they're gone, they're gone. His hands were like birds breaking from cover. Gone? Jack said. Gone, gone. My money's gone. Gone where? Jeanette asked. Who knows, who knows? Al said

Bonfiglio came out. Just telling her, Al says to him, pointing with his chin. Then, oh, he excuses his oversight, my daughter Jeanette, Al says. Bonnie's face turns pink. Oh, your daughter, he repeated. You're daughter. Oh sure, he says. Look it, Al, he says, he seems to be tucking in different things in different places. His eyes go here and there and then back again. I… I… I, he says. Yeah, I know, Al says, knowing and conciliatory. I know, Bonnie I know. No, Bonnie says, no no, I mean, he says backing up. Yeah yeah yeah, Al says patting him on the shoulder, following. How much for you, Bonnie? Bonnie's eyes pop like light bulbs. He looks like a blowfish.

Same as for everybody, he says, hitching his fingertips up toward his chest. Everybody? Al says. During this time Jeanette has remained frozen, still. The breath-taking monuments of Mt. Rushmore are not more still nor more silent.

What do you mean everybody? Al continues. I mean, uh…I think uh…I think they got the same from everybody in that game, Bonnie said. You think he…? Al said. Who? Bonnie said. Tubby? Oh yeah, Bonnie said. I could tell. I never would a known she was a…dio mio…I mean, I mean the nun there. Her I mean. Yeah yeah yeah. I think it was Caponegro too, Al said. Huh, Bonnie said.

Jeanette drove back home with Jack. They were silent. Their money was gone. And certainly, they would have to leave town, about this there could be no doubt. What to do? They sat at Jeanette's kitchen table. At this point in some other stories, it's true, they might think of killing themselves, or something like this. And who knows if perhaps this almost might have happened. Who knows how close they came to it. But it didn't happen. Instead, they decided to get married. Joe even got down on one knee. Yes! Jeanette pushed him over with her foot and he sat back on his rear and then got up and bear hugged her, feeling her ribs and her breathing, and she felt his arms. But how could they get married with no money and with all these rumors. What would happen when the priest would say, does anyone know why these two should not be joined and so on and so forth? Would she wear a white dress even, and if she did maybe the priest himself would fall over dead.

Jack thought for quite a while. He walked out into the evening. The night bloomed like a dark blue pansy. The trees burgeoned with a bright humming. Tiny bicycle bells rang over and over. Giant taps poured pale ale down through green leaves that waved about quite drunk. How was it possible to know what someone was, even if you did know? How was it possible to know what they weren't, even if you knew that too? Then there was the question of money. Well even though Al might have lost that money,

he still had a lot more than they did. And he was Jeanette's father, of course, and one must respect one's elders, but nonetheless Jack, then and there, decided on a drastic course. An extreme situation needed extreme measures.

The next day he went to see Al. History does not record what exactly they said to each other, and I must admit that I would have been quite interested to hear their conversation. Suffice it to say that Al agreed to the payment of a certain sum in exchange for Jack not going to the cops with regard to certain matters and so on and so forth and Jack agreed to never say a word about anything to anyone at any future time because of course paternity for any respectable Italian type of guy was something to be taken with the utmost seriousness and any slightest suspicion and so on and so forth would certainly be highly detrimental to one's standing and all of that. They reached an agreement.

But there was still a problem. Rumors were all over the place. They had slinked around like a hundred stray cats for days, for weeks, for months. Fr. Conti was very gravely concerned and on top of that there were these events over at the convent, and even the police were coming by. He refused to hear of performing any marriage ceremony in any way at all. He would not hear of it. Al called Caponegro. Caponegro listened. He said he'd kill the story that was brewing in the local newspaper about the nun who this and that and so on and so forth. He would do this for a fee of course. A fee.

And it was a stiff fee too, as you might expect. Caponegro was not actually a very nice person. No. Al went back to Fr. Conti. He explained that the news story was simmering in its vat like the grapes of homemade muscatel. You could hear it percolating if you put your ear to the wall. Surely the church must have resources to defend itself against such unwarranted besmirchments and so on and so on. Conti was a priest of the old school. He was about as flexible as an ironing board. He had a wide mouth, thick lips, a perpetual five o'clock shadow and a way of speaking

always a bit too loud. He barked. Who knows where they got him from. No one liked him. He sat there listening, in the dining room of the parish house, a red lamp on a sideboard, his brown Sicilian complexion dusted over with iron filings around his jaw. At first he said no. Al explained the things that might be coming down the road, raising the tent flap on that little sideshow just a bit. Conti tightened himself up like somebody's rear end. He swallowed like a turkey. All right, he said, he would do the marriage ceremony but it would be at the 6:25 morning mass on Monday morning of a certain day month year and so forth. Al promised there would be no story. The police would get some money also, and so that would take care of that.

As he was driving back, Al realized he was going to be pretty well broke before too long. He remembered the old days of easy money and the times with his first wife, Jane, and the little house they had had up on Indiana Avenue off State Street, a quiet place with trees and flower boxes in windows. And then he remembered the drunken brawl that night when she'd thrown glasses and overturned an armchair and he'd slapped her, twice, fairly hard, hard enough to make two red blotches on the side of her face, one near her cheekbone and one along her jaw, so that it looked like she had two streaks of scarlet paint on her face, and the tears streamed from the corners of her eyes and she twisted off the large expensive diamond that he had given her and threw it at him. He still had the ring. He had always kept it. It was in a drawer in his bedroom. He decided he would go to see Venezia.

Nez ran a bar over near the bus station, a small dark narrow place full of small dark narrow people. And next door, he ran a pawn shop. It was the only one in town, in fact. The ring was in a black case that was like the visor on a suit of armor. Inside was a miniature night, a black hole that sucked down space and time. In the midst of it, one star still shone.

What a ya got there for me? Nez said. He had a gray silk shirt on with black stripes running down in it like rain. Two rings on each hand, one black onyx, one diamond, one red thing and one plain gold. Ya ya ya, he said

as he looked at it, turning it around. He said this very softly, almost under his breath. Then he stuck a shot glass in his eye and looked at it some more. Ya hmm hmmm. All right, he said, and he made his offer. Al was surprised. It wasn't too bad, better than what he had expected, and so he took it.

That evening he gave Jeanette her wedding present, in cash, which would also be, he knew, her going away present. Well sometimes fathers are good for something. And so this was the way that she and Jack were able to go out to Los Angeles, no more fruit business and no more who knows what. Al knew some people out there, and after the wedding he was already making phone calls. As for sister Mary Jesse, they said that she and Tubolino were in Florida and were getting into the real estate business. Al never did get that 700 back. Eh.